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ABSTRACT

Computer technology is altering the way people cope with emotional distress. Computers enable people worldwide and from all cultural groups to give and receive emotional support when it may be culturally stigmatizing to seek face-to-face support or when support services are limited or non-existent. Online support groups attract a broad range of participants. They vary in age, occupation, gender, and marital status. In this document the importance of cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural stigmas related to seeking emotional support through online support groups is discussed. Pertinent cultural issues include influence of a Western value system; cultural issues for group leaders; cultural benefits; and cultural limitations, as well as an overview of online support groups. It is assumed that the reader possesses basic computer skills and understands computer terminology, but may be unfamiliar with the cultural issues of online support groups. (Contains 52 references and 3 tables.) (Author)

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Cultural and Global Linkages of Emotional Support through Online Support Groups

by

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Chapter Eleven

Cultural and Global Linkages of Emotional Support Through Online Support Groups

Juneau Mahan Gary

Computer technology is altering the way people cope with emotional distress. Computers enable people worldwide and from all cultural groups to give and receive emotional support when it may be culturally stigmatizing to seek face-to-face support or when support services are limited or non-existent (McFadden & Jencius, 2000). Historically, people discussed emotional distress with someone they knew; with someone in a similar situation; with a shaman, spiritual, or indigenous healer; with an acupuncturist, clergy, or mental health professional; or did not discuss the issue at all. Now, they can reside in remote or sequestered locations (e.g., Greenland or Fiji), in inaccessible locations (e.g., the Australian Outback or U.S. military bases on Guam or in Alaska's tundra), or in underserved locations (e.g., Bangladesh or Appalachia) and seek emotional support online. (Finn, 1996).

Since the 1980's, people have been seeking support for their emotional distress with others in anonymous cyber group settings called online support groups and online self-help groups. The popularity of these online groups, henceforth called online support groups, has soared because of increased access to reasonably priced computers and advances in technology. The online support group is a growing cyber service that utilizes a computer and a modem connection to the Internet. People communicate with others who are experiencing common issues such as coping with physical abuse, HIV, sexual assault and the devastation of natural disasters, terrorism, or war, to mention a few. They participate with a level of safety, privacy, and control from the comfort of their home, public or university library, community center, or computer center.

Online support groups attract a broad range of participants. They vary in age, occupation, gender, and marital status and discuss diverse issues; most are Caucasian (Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000). The range of participation is broader than the YAVIS-type client (young, attractive,

verbal, intelligent, successful) (Schofield, 1964) who has the financial resources and time to benefit from traditional Western face-to-face psychotherapy (Hughes, 2000).

Research has been conducted on online support groups using YAVIS-type subjects and non-YAVIS-type subjects and analyzed their use of online support groups. Research on non-YAVIS-type subjects includes teenaged mothers (Dunham, Hurshman, Litwin, Gusella, Ellsworth, & Dodd, 1998); people with eating disorders (Winzelberg, 1997); and survivors of breast cancer (Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1996) while research on YAVIS-type subjects was conducted with social workers with occupational stress (Meier, 1997). Teen mothers, for example, may not have perceived themselves to have sufficient time to attend traditional face-to-face support groups while those with breast cancer, for example, may have resisted traditional support groups in order to avoid family shame or dishonor or to avoid community or familial isolation and stigmatization (Wu, 1999). Thus, online support groups can be attractive to a group of new users who may have previously resisted peer support because of culturally-ingrained traditions of non-disclosure of "family secrets"; because of medical, financial, or transportation constraints that thwarted convening face-to-face; because of feeling too overwhelmed to join a peer support group; or because peer support groups are culturally inaccessible.

In addition to the demographic diversity of online support groups, the free service attracts participants. The combination of a lack of a financial commitment, the freedom and privacy to participate outside of one's medical insurance provider, and the absence of family involvement in financial or insurance business (i.e., parental or spousal insurer signing insurance forms and agreeing to make co-payments) promotes privacy and independence. These financial incentives, plus diverse demographics among participants, appear to broaden the base of non-YAVIS-type users in online support groups.

In this chapter, the importance of cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural stigmas related to seeking emotional support through online support groups is discussed. Pertinent cultural issues include influence of a Western value system, cultural issues for group leaders, cultural benefits, and cultural limitations as well as an overview of online support groups. It is assumed that the reader possesses basic computer skills and understands computer terminology but may be unfamiliar with the cultural issues of online support groups.

Research and Online Support Groups

Although current research on the efficacy and perceived usefulness of online support groups is limited, it is critical to determine if they offer the therapeutic features of face-to-face support groups. Preliminary research is suggestive of positive comparisons and comparable effects (Davison et al, 2000; Harris-Bowlsbey, 2000). In four studies, online support group participants reported feeling supported and connected to others who shared similar issues (Dunham et al., 1998; Weinberg, Schmale, Uken & Wessel, 1995a; Winzelberg, 1997; Meier, 1997). For instance, in one online support group for people with eating disorders, Winzelberg (1997) reported that 31 percent of members disclosed personal distress, 23 percent gave information (but 12 percent of the information was inaccurate), 16 percent gave emotional support, and 15 percent sought help unrelated to eating disorders. Weinberg, Uken, Schmale, and Adamek (1995b) concluded that several of Yalom's (1995) therapeutic factors had significant therapeutic benefits in one online support group for cancer survivors. In particular, the three therapeutic factors of *instillation of hope*, *group cohesion*, and *universality* were deemed the most active of all therapeutic factors and were especially beneficial for the cancer support group members. These therapeutic factors contributed to the online support group's bonding and perceived helpfulness.

In addition to positive research results, most participant self-reports were positive. Participants perceived online support groups as being helpful, validating, and supportive, and most would not continue to participate without some perceived benefit (Callahan, Hilty, & Nesbitt, 1998; Meier, 1997). However, dissatisfied participants cited three issues that created a barrier to their participation: (1) an absence of visual, auditory, and interpersonal cues, (2) a sense of isolation for those who prefer face-to-face interaction, and (3) technology problems such as being cut off line (Galinsky, Schopler & Abell, 1996).

Online Support and Western Values

Western values dominate online support groups as well as online mental health services and the Internet. Western tenets and values such as meeting at a specific time for a pre-determined length of time; seeking help outside of one's family and/or cultural group; searching for individualistic solutions; self-disclosing personal problems; communicating openly with strangers; helping each other; and seeking self-help are the foundation of most online support groups. Most participants of online support groups reside in North America (i.e., Bermuda, Canada, Caribbean, Central

America, Greenland, Mexico, and United States) as defined by Encyclopedia Britannica (2000), with Americans representing 50 percent of Internet users worldwide (Ryan, 2000). The terms "American" and "North American" include members of cultural and racial groups that have migrated to North America as well as to native-born North Americans. Europeans are the second largest group of participants (Ryan, 2000).

Western values, in conjunction with a large global base of English-speaking users, result in English as the common language in most online support groups. Consequently, participants must possess the ability to communicate effectively in written English without the aid of non-verbal cues such as eye contact, facial expression, social distance, gestures, vocal tone, style of questioning and timing of responses (Cogan, 1996; Mehr, 1998). Participants and moderators should routinely clarify each other's words and statements in order to maintain accurate communication and reduce cultural and communication barriers (Mehr, 1998). For instance, "to table" an issue has different meanings in the United Kingdom and in the United States, or days of the "weekend" vary in different parts of the world. Precise verbal communication can reduce many cultural and communication barriers.

Online Support

Online support groups offer many features of face-to-face support groups but do so using cyber communities rather than meeting face-to-face. Similar to face-to-face support groups, online support groups can range from serving as one therapeutic component of an intervention plan or comprehensive mental health treatment plan to serving as the sole support system. See Gary and Remolino (2000) for a comprehensive description of the benefits and limitations of online support groups. The nuts and bolts of online support groups are summarized.

Access

Online support groups can be accessed through use of a computer and a modem in conjunction with a major Internet service provider (ISP) such as MSN or in conjunction with a local ISP. Once connected to the Internet, online support groups may also be reached through Internet portals (e.g., Yahoo) or through specialized web sites (e.g., www.psychcentral.com). Major ISPs, large commercial web sites and portals set individual standards and procedures regarding regulations, quality control, crisis management, disclaimers, and training of group leaders.

Format

Online support groups can function in real time (i.e., synchronous groups) and/or through e-mail discussion groups, also called listservs, bulletin boards, or newsgroups (i.e., asynchronous groups). The synchronous format is similar to participating in a telephone conference call that is text-based, whereas the listserv format is similar to sending e-mail and awaiting responses. Davison et al. (2000) and Page, Delmonico, Walsh, L'Amoreaux, Danninhirsh, Thompson, Ingram, & Evans (2000) have documented 40,000 newsgroups and 873,370 listings for *support groups*. Both formats are described.

- *Synchronous Groups* are real time and interactive. They simulate discussions with others using text-based communication. They meet at a scheduled time to encourage consistent participation and convene for one hour on average. They are sometimes called chat rooms but not all chat rooms (e.g., open chats) are online support groups. In online support groups, members receive immediate support, feedback, advice, and/or information. They correspond anonymously and use contrived screen names (i.e., pseudonyms). They take turns communicating and can communicate with the whole room or converse with an individual as others follow the dialogue on their personal computer screen.

Typically, group sessions are not printed and the leader does not maintain session notes. The quality of each session differs and is based on the composition of the group, cohesiveness of the group, relevance of the topic, group facilitation skills of the leader, and participants' pressing issues. An excerpt from a typical online support group session for loss and grief can be found in Gary and Remolino (2000). Samples of online support groups and web sites are illustrated in Table 1 and demonstrate the range of self-help topics.

Table 1. Sampling of Support Groups, Self-Help Groups, and Web Sites.

Addiction

www.addictions.com
www.addictions.net
www.na.org
www.recovery-man.com

Anxiety

www.socialanxiety.com

Crisis Support

www.crisissupport.org

Culture-based

www.nativeweb.com

Depression

www.psycom.net/depression.central.html#contents
www.ndmda.org

Eating Disorders

www.eating-disorder.org
www.addictions.net

Gambling

www.800gambler.org

General Mental Health

www.mhsource.com
www.apa.org/psychnet
www.psychcentral.com
www.mentalhelp.net
http://www.counseling.org/consumers/consumers.htm

Grief/Loss

www.death-dying.com
www.griefsupport.org

Internet Addiction

www.netaddiction.com
www.addictions.com

Self-Help

www.mentalhelp.net/selfhelp

Suicide

www.suicidology.org
www.suicidepreventtriangle.org

Other Sites

Portals and Web Sites

www.yahoo.com (multilingual Yahoo! sites worldwide)
http://boards.webmd.com/roundtable
www.ivillagehealth.com
www.aol.com (multilingual world service sites)
www.msn.com (multilingual world service sites)

Mental Health Resources for Clinicians

http://cybercounsel.uncg.edu
www.behavior.net
www.behavior.net/JOB (Journal of Online Behavior)
www.counseling.org
www.apa.org

In spite of the lack of physical interaction and absence of non-verbal communication, limited expressions of emotions are conveyed symbolically, visually, and in shorthand by emoticons as illustrated in Table 2. Emoticons are strung-together keystrokes that resemble facial expressions when turned 90 degrees clockwise. Emoticons can facilitate the transmission of emotions such as humor or disappointment which may be difficult to communicate in text-only communication or difficult to transmit across cultures and languages (Collie, Mitchell, & Murphy, 2000). Some emoticons transcend cultural differences and may be used more or used less in specific cultures or countries. For example, in Japan where it is important to *save face*, the "frown" in Table 2 should be used sparingly to avoid offending Japanese participants.

Table 2. Cyber Shorthand and Symbolic Expression of Emotions.

Emotions	*Symbols*
Hug to others:	{{{{{}}}}}
Hug to the entire room:	{{{{{room}}}}}
Hug and kiss:	{}&**
Smile:	:) and ☺
Frown:	:(
Shorthand	*Symbols*
Long time, no see:	LTNS

Laughing out loud:	LOL
Cursing:	&!$#*&
Yelling:	Capitalize word (e.g., he HATES that)

- *Asynchronous Groups* are posted messages to a specific person or to the general membership. Participants post messages and questions twenty-four hours, seven days a week in listservs or newsgroups. This format allows participants to send and retrieve messages at their convenience and regardless of their time zone. However, responses are delayed while the sender awaits replies and support is not immediate.

Group Leader

Leaders facilitate online support groups in synchronous time and may be called hosts or moderators. Depending upon the site, some hosts are mental health professionals (licensed or unlicensed), while other hosts have no mental health training at all. A mental health degree may not be required (as is also true for some face-to-face support groups) so counseling, also known as online counseling, is not permitted. Instead, hosts function as *resource persons* rather than online counselors. They make referrals to telephone helplines, self-help resources, clergy, face-to-face support or self-help groups, spiritual or indigenous healers, local counseling centers, crisis centers, acupuncturists, and hospice centers, among others. They also recommend links to other online support groups (see Table 1), to resources worldwide (www.na.org/event-reg.htm, Narcotics Anonymous worldwide services), to culture-based web sites (e.g., www.nativeweb.com, a resource for indigenous cultures worldwide), to mental health web sites (e.g., www.psychcentral.com), and to professionally oriented mental health web sites with a focus on international online issues (e.g., Journal of Online Behavior at www.behavior.net/JOB). Hosts will find Grohol (2000) helpful for referrals to mental health web sites.

Moderators also ensure that communication remains focused on the topic and that ground rules (i.e., remain anonymous, take turns, remain focused on the topic, abstain from harassment (e.g., personal criticism, cursing, or name-calling), and maintain confidentiality) are enforced. Violators of the ground rules can be sanctioned. Each ISP, portal, or web site maintains a "Terms of Service" contract that outlines appropriate online behavior, explains how violations are handled and metes out sanctions. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous' "Netiquette" advisory and bylaws

(http://www.aa-intergroup.org/html/faq.html#13) describe appropriate online behavior.

The appropriate screening and training of moderators enables them to facilitate basic helping skills and referral skills as well as facilitate group interaction (Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997). Prospective moderators can be screened online to determine their interpersonal skills and their ability to facilitate group interaction. Once selected, they are typically trained online using a distance learning model of training. Typically, experienced moderators mentor newly trained moderators.

Ethical and Legal Concerns

The moderation of or participation in online support groups raises some ethical and legal questions that currently remain unanswered. The online support group, often hosted by non-mental health professionals as previously discussed, is not considered an online *mental health* service as defined by most national and state/provincial statutes, mental health professional associations, and mental health licensing boards. Consequently, mental health standards, statutes, and regulations that were designed to protect consumers of mental health services are not applicable to non-professional moderators.

Several mental health professional organizations and licensing boards, including American Counseling Association (ACA), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) are grappling with the ethical and legal issues raised by the gamut of online mental health services (Lee, 1998; Bloom, 1997; Bloom & Walz, 2000). Online mental health services function without regard to geographic borders or local, national, or international regulations, making legal mechanisms of resolution awkward for legal liability, dispute resolution, and professional discipline (Lee, 1998). In 1999, the American Counseling Association approved "Ethical Standards for Internet On-Line Counseling" (http://www.counseling.org/resources/internet.htm) to be used in conjunction with the "ACA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice." The new ACA Standards for online counseling limit online counseling to the state in which the professional counselor is licensed, the state in which the client resides, and the client's state must license professional counselors. However, online support groups are not considered to be an online counseling service offered by professional counselors and are not included in the new ACA Standards for online counseling.

Comprehensive revisions of mental health statutes and ethical standards will require the coordination of all mental health disciplines and

state, federal, and international agencies. The professional organizations and licensing boards must address all components of online mental health services regarding qualifications, compliance, boundaries of competence, and supervision (Bloom, 1997; Lee, 1998; Bloom & Walz, 2000).

Cultural Issues and Online Support

As computer and electronic technology connect people residing in the vast majority of countries and in remote regions, the world increasingly becomes a "global village" instead of many disparate communities (Cogan, 1996). Contact with people from other countries and cultures fosters a pluralistic society of racial, religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Brill, 1995; Mehr, 1998; Gladding, 1997; McFadden & Jencius, 2000). As participants support each other worldwide, they can learn from the diversity of perspectives offered by other participants. Examples of multilingual support groups, self-help groups, and web sites are illustrated in Table 3. The exposure to diverse cultural values encourages the "trying on" of other cultural perspectives and creates the potential to alter one's stereotypes, prejudices, and ethnocentric views (Bowman & Bowman, 1998; Chan, 1999). The diversity highlights the fact that the cultural perspective and value system espoused in European-American/ North American/Western society is just one of *many* value systems and perspectives worldwide (Mehr, 1998). Such insight can promote creative problem solving for participants who may feel vulnerable, isolated, or misunderstood.

In the global village, incidents that were once considered local community dramas are now witnessed by people in other parts of the world through global news coverage. Tragic events or natural disasters such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th in the United States in 2001; the fatal floods in Mozambique in 2000; explosion of the Russian submarine in the Barents Sea in 2000; fatal school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999; bombings of the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; and the death of Princess Diana in 1997 demonstrate this point. Such traumatic incidents produce a range of emotional reactions from anger to anxiety, depression; and fear in people worldwide based on their cultural perspective and worldview (Swartz-Kulstad & Martin, 1999). Their reactions, in turn, influence the type of support that they seek or give through online support groups, especially if local or onsite support is limited or non-existent (Kimwell & Heaps, 1999; Walker, 1999).

The American Embassy bombings killed or injured mostly Kenyans and Tanzanians, yet Kenya and Tanzania had few, if any, grief support networks or psychological support systems to assist victims and rescuers in coping with emotional distress (Kimwell & Heaps, 1999). "There may be only one psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker for every one million people, and...psychotropic medication is virtually unavailable" (Kimwell & Heaps, 1999, p. 1). Religious and kinship relationships may have eased short term distress but the long term emotional trauma remains unaddressed. Furthermore, passersby in Kenya and Tanzania who rescued victims (and who were untrained and unprepared for the emotional consequences) experienced nightmares and intense emotional reactions that also remain unaddressed (Kimwell & Heaps, 1999). Since emotional support is limited or unavailable locally, residents of Kenya and Tanzania who have access to computers and modems could seek emotional support online with others worldwide who are grieving these same Embassy bombings and other catastrophes.

In most countries, only a small segment of the population may have access to computers and therefore access to online support groups. Those online participants with access to computers may differ from fellow countrymen based upon their economic, resident (e.g., expatriates), or social status, in their worldview, and in their understanding of and ability to use non-traditional and non-culturally-based methods, such as online support groups, to seek support.

All participants bring culturally-based life experiences, coping mechanisms, personal attitudes, biases, beliefs, and knowledge that influence their ability to seek help. These cultural influences affect what is culturally appropriate to discuss beyond family boundaries as well as how and when to seek help (Wu, 1999). For instance, some topics discussed in online support groups are culturally taboo to discuss face-to-face in specific cultures or countries. Such topics could include pregnancy, family violence, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), suicide, abortion, value of male versus female children, HIV, birth spacing, death, use of contraceptives, breast feeding, arranged marriages, and gender-based division of labor, among others.

Cultural Issues for Hosts and Moderators

Hosts who are culturally competent and knowledgeable about various cultural systems and values are more likely to be effective in leading a culturally diverse online support group. Cultural competence does not require familiarity with *all* cultural rituals, values, resources, or perceptions worldwide; this would be an impossible task. It *does* however, require a

respect for and understanding of culture and its impact upon participants as well as the acceptance of cultural differences within the online support

Table 3.Sampling of Multilingual Support Groups, Self-Help Groups, and Web Sites.

Site Name	Internet Address (URL)	Comments
Counseling and Support in Japan	http://www2.gol.com/users/andrew/	• Information on support groups and counseling services for people residing in Japan • Japanese and English languages • Requires a download of *Japanese Text Display System* • Use *Internet Explorer* for best results
Narcotics Anonymous (NA) World Services	www.na.org/event-reg.htm	• International meeting search locates NA meetings world wide and in various languages
Online Intergroupof Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (OIAA)	www.aa-intergroup.org	• Serves all online AA fellowship groups • Online services for synchronous and asynchronous groups • Real time online groups in 7 world languages • E-mail services in 11 world languages • "Sounds of Sobriety" (SOS) online services for members who are deaf and hearing impaired
Un Camino Espiritual (A Spiritual Journey) (NA)	www.nuestra-net.com/camino	• Online NA e-mail support groups • Spanish language

group (Brill, 1995; Gladding, 1997). Specifically, moderators must transcend communication and cultural barriers in order to be effective across cultures and maintain open relationships as well as present culturally acceptable solutions and offer culturally appropriate support and interventions. They must be aware of the relevance of and appropriate use of indigenous support systems; must understand how cultural systems operate and influence behaviors; and should inquire about participants' traditional cultural helpers. As a point of clarification, physicians are frequently consulted in Asian -American communities for emotional distress since it is culturally acceptable to be physically ill, even if the illness results from the person suppressing and denying distressing emotional reactions and somatizing the emotional distress (Vogel, 1999). Thus, Asian-Americans may initially join an online support group under the guise of medical concerns rather than emotional support. In such cases, the culturally competent host can encourage participants to be receptive to other forms of cultural support and coping styles that are perhaps a stretch beyond the participant's current level of cultural comfort.

Co-leading by two culturally competent hosts might ensure that cultural subtleties are attended to while group needs are also met. Co-hosts' abilities to "read" the situation and "read" participants from a cultural perspective contributes to the perceived usefulness of culturally diverse online support groups (Brill, 1995).

No Global Village In My Backyard: Socio-Political Realities

Although the Internet is global, leaders of a handful of countries shun it. Leaders of countries such as Saudi Arabia, China, Cuba, Iraq and North Korea censor, regulate, monitor, or outright forbid Internet use by citizens (CNN, 1998, 1999a, 2000). Customarily, leaders of these countries do not tolerate the free exchange of ideas and support that the Internet makes possible through online support groups and other Internet services. Such governmental control makes participation in online support groups virtually impossible for citizens of certain countries.

In China, for example, chat rooms, newsgroups, and bulletin boards need government approval to operate and all web site information must pass a security check (CNN, 2000). Violators are punished. Further, Chinese authorities plan to establish an official government body to regulate and monitor all Internet content. This will most likely threaten anonymity in online support groups. Other countries such as Saudi Arabia plan to legitimize the Internet but foreign publications and outside information will be strictly censored and controlled to block politically, socially, or culturally

sensitive sites (CNN, 1998). Finally in Iraq ownership of a computer modem (necessary to access online support groups and e-mail) is illegal (CNN, 1999a). Thus, citizens of some isolated countries *cannot* participate in online support groups, even if they own a computer and in spite of their emotional distress or need for emotional support. The expatriate community residing in countries such as these can usually circumvent local governmental censorship and monitoring.

Cultural Benefits And Limitations Of Online Support Groups

Before describing the cultural benefits and limitations of online support groups in this section, readers should note that nearly every perceived benefit by some is a perceived limitation by others. Personal circumstances, worldview, cultural values, and access to computer technology influence one's perception of a benefit or a limitation.

Cultural Benefits Of Online Support Groups

The benefits of online support groups as they address cultural issues include increased access to support, specialized online support groups, Internet time, universality as a therapeutic factor, and privacy. Each benefit is discussed.

Increased Access to Support

Online support groups provide support and camaraderie to people for many reasons, in different ways and at a convenient time based on *each participant's* time zone (Sussman, 1998; Weinberg et al., 1996). They enable people to seek support from a wide variety of perspectives when feeling vulnerable and increase their access to support services if and when support is not available in their country, cultural group, or geographic region. For example, the web site "Counseling and Support in Japan" (at http://www2.gol.com/users/andrew) provides information in Japanese and English about support groups and counseling services for people residing in and relocating to Japan. Web sites and support groups such as this one reduce the sense of isolation for those who reside abroad and confront a vastly different culture and language, for those who seek peer or professional support that may be stigmatized in the country, for those who reside in underserved or remote locations, for those who are housebound, or for those seeking anonymity (Finn, 1996; Sussman, 1998). Finally, Internet access at a library, computer center, or community center enables people who cannot afford to purchase a computer to participate online as an equal member without financial resources becoming a barrier (Lee, 2000).

Participants focus exclusively on pertinent needs and issues rather than on distracters such as physical attributes, linguistic accents, or social status because members are faceless, genderless, raceless, religionless, ageless, and classless, unless *they* choose to disclose such personal information. The absence of distracters reduces some of the prejudices and barriers that limit social interaction based on demographic and personal characteristics (Bowman & Bowman, 1998). For instance, the absence of demographic characteristics and physical attributes enables a Palestinian man and an Israeli man to support each other and develop an online relationship but the same support and relationship would most likely never occur face-to-face in Israel.

Unlike synchronous online support groups that offer support at a specific time, the listservs offer support twenty-four hours daily. Listservs are beneficial for several reasons, including support can be sought when a participant is most vulnerable; when a participant needs a great deal of support that relatives, friends and their local community cannot provide; and when a participant has limited available time (e.g., before or after others are asleep or others are at work or school) (Finn, 1996).

Specialized Online Support Groups

Since online support groups are not limited by geographic boundaries, groups dedicated to specialized topics, age groups, or gender groups can be formed successfully from a global population. Furthermore, some online support groups may need to be age-specific and/or gender-specific in order to accommodate to cultural mores, attract participants, or focus on specific issues. Consider the following three examples:

(1) older adults may be uncomfortable discussing thoughts of depression or suicide with younger adults, believing that youth are not culturally appropriate individuals to dispense advice and support. They would seek an age-specific online support group;

(2) young adults may benefit from age-specific online support groups to discuss contraceptive use or arranged marriages; and

(3) female only online support groups may support women coping with sexual or physical abuse.

Topics such as these are taboo to discuss in some cultures and countries and are considered family secrets that will bring shame to the family if disclosed publicly. For example, in Japan, women do not typically discuss or seek help for domestic violence or sexual assault (Kuzo, 1999). Therefore, anonymity through cyber space may reduce Japanese victims' inhibitions

and isolation and increase emotional support without bringing shame to the family.

Horne (1999) describes the emergence of online international women's groups for social activism and advocacy. These member-led groups contribute to and create a progressive internationalism that challenges the status quo of women and initiates change around the world. This is the next step in the evolution of groups for and by women. One group, Women's Eyes on the World Bank, monitors and advocates for women's needs at the World Bank. This group cited the World Bank's inattention to gender equity. In response, the World Bank established a Policy Research Report on gender and an ad hoc non-governmental committee to initiate a process for change (Horne, 1999). Another group, Models of Social Action Involving Communities (MOSAIC) is a non-profit organization that works with local and global women's groups. MOSAIC members exchange information, support women, and create coalitions around issues that women determine to be vital to their region. MOSAIC members supported women's groups in Hungary (i.e., Women for Women Against Violence) and in Russia (i.e., Russian Association of Crisis Centers) (Horne, 1999).

"Internet Time"

Internet time is a relatively new global concept of time. Increased use of the Internet has raised interest in new ways of measuring time. The Swatch Group of Switzerland devised Internet time as a new universal system of time to replace Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and to transcend time zones by making the time of day the same across all time zones (CNN, 1999b). Internet time is advantageous when scheduling online support groups and arranging online teleconferences (CNN, 1999b).

In Internet time, the day is divided into 1,000 "beats" per 24-hour cycle and each "beat" is equivalent to 1 minute and 26.4 seconds. Internet time is designated by "@" preceding a number (i.e., time of day) between 0 and 999. A day of Internet time begins at @000 Biel Meridian Time (BMT), the Swatch meridian in Biel, Switzerland, where @000 is midnight and @500 is noon. One's local time would operate on BMT but @000 would not be midnight. For instance, if an online support group convenes at @125, then in New York City, Los Angeles, and Biel, the equivalent times for @125 would be 8 p.m., 5 p.m., and 3 a.m. respectively although @125 is the Internet time for all three locations. Internet time may appear awkward initially and the average person may be reluctant to convert but the new time concept facilitates cyber connections across time zones.

Universality as a Therapeutic Factor

Others struggle too. This is not always evident to an emotionally distressed person who often wallows in isolation. Isolation may be exacerbated by geographic isolation or by cultural traditions that reinforce suffering in silence. Universality, one of Yalom's (1995) therapeutic factors, unites participants as they share similar thoughts, feelings, fears, and/or reactions with their online group. As participants share and support others, they realize that distress is a part of life, they feel validated, and they heal as they learn to cope from others.

Privacy

Online support groups give participants the privacy to seek support and information about behavior that might be perceived as a cultural and/or familial stigma and thereby become a barrier to accessing support and/or information. Further, in a face-to-face support group or other culturally accepted face-to-face support system, one's social status in the community might be jeopardized and/or family name shamed and thus inhibit participation. Anonymity protects participants' identity and/or family name and helps to overcome some of the social and cultural barriers without participants fearing ridicule, cultural stigmatization, or vulnerability within the community (Wu, 1999; Day & Schneider, 2000).

While privacy facilitates communication for some, it should not be taken for granted by others. In the United States, as an example, privacy in the work place may be compromised because the employer may be legally entitled to monitor computer activity and transmissions (Hughes, 2000). A participant should minimize participation in online support groups on an employer's computer, during the lunch hour or after business hours for example, to maintain privacy. Participants in other countries should become acquainted with their country's privacy laws.

The sharing of computers raises other privacy issues when the participant is known within a circle of employees or in a household. If employees share a business computer, other employees may be able to read listserv messages or transcripts from an employee's support group. Moreover, one computer per household is common. Thus, if a computer is shared with family members, they too may be able to read private messages or transcripts. Participants using a shared computer at work or at home should join online support groups that require a password to participate, use a secure site, or use encryption software prior to self-disclosing.

Cultural Limitations of Online Support Groups

Limitations of online support groups as they address cultural issues include governmental control, limited feedback, limited and/or incompatible support, breaches in anonymity, quality control, members with limited English language skills, differing stages of group development, and hoax perpetuations. Each limitation is discussed.

Government Control

Governmental leaders in a small group of countries censor or forbid Internet access by citizens. Such governmental regulation makes participation in online support groups impossible or illegal, hampers support, and/or compromises anonymity. The expatriate community is usually exempt from local governmental control.

Limited Feedback

Online support groups enable participants to "hide" emotionally and interpersonally behind computer screens (Sampson et al., 1997; Spinney, 1995). The lack of face-to-face contact obscures vocal intonations and verbal and non-verbal cues, including body language and expressions of emotion. Limited feedback may require changes in a participant's habitual patterns of interaction and thinking in order to overcome this limitation (Day & Schneider, 2000). To partially compensate for the interpersonal limitations, for example, participants use text-based shorthand to convey certain emotions and these are illustrated in Table 2. Dissatisfied participants typically cite limited feedback as a disincentive to participate (Galinsky et al., 1996).

Although a participant may initially feel uncomfortable with limited emotional and visual feedback, such limitations may, in time, be overcome. Those with cultural barriers that stigmatize or inhibit open discussions about emotional distress or those with interpersonal difficulties may perceive limited feedback, reduced interpersonal intimacy and decreased emotional intensity as *incentives* to participate. They may not feel pressured to take personal and interpersonal risks as they might experience in face-to-face support groups where their identity and/or family name may be recognized and shamed (Weinberg et al., 1995a; Wu, 1999; Casey, 2000). The lack of interpersonal pressure, coupled with the ability to participate gradually at one's own comfort level, and the freedom to offer honest feedback without feeling inhibited or embarrassed, may increase participants' self-confidence as they self-disclose, become assertive, set boundaries, and support others at their own pace (Lee, 2000; Day & Schneider, 2000).

A Panacea?

Online support groups are not appropriate for everyone and are not a panacea. Some participants may need additional medical, educational, social, and/or mental health services or may need a consultation with a spiritual or indigenous healer, clergy, shaman, or acupuncturist. Furthermore, limited feedback, as previously discussed, makes the assessment and referral process difficult and awkward for the host, especially when the host is unfamiliar with services available in the participant's country or geographic region.

The isolating, mechanical, and individualistic nature of seeking help and support from a Western perspective and through a computer may feel unnatural to members of some cultural groups, especially for those cultural groups with a collective worldview (Bowman & Bowman, 1998). Face-to-face and group interactions tend to be valued and preferred by Asian-Americans, Latin-Americans, and Native-Americans, to mention a few (Sue & Sue, 1990). The Western value of equating emotional support with computers and self-disclosure (i.e., self-disclosure + computer = emotional support) may be incompatible with the worldview of some cultural groups.

Anonymity Breaches

Steps are taken to maintain the anonymity of each participant as well as the anonymity of group dialogue. Moderators promote anonymity by discouraging the exchange of *identifying* information as well as send links and other requested information to a participant's e-mail address rather than to a residence. Moderators must remain abreast of current advances in computer security to ensure participants' privacy and anonymity. They should consider using a secure site and encryption software to protect the transmission of personal information and to thwart breaches.

In spite of computer security procedures, anonymity can be breached and dialogues can be intercepted (Lee, 1998; Sampson et al., 1997; Sussman, 1998). Participants must consider the risk of a breach in anonymity before joining an online support group, must weigh the benefits against the risks when accessing services, must understand limits of privacy, and are advised to limit the disclosure of personal and identifying information during the registration or orientation process. In summary, *caveat emptor* (or buyer beware).

Quality Control

The quality of online support groups varies. Each sets its own standards, procedures, and training programs for hosts. Locating an appropriate online support group may be haphazard because there is no

master plan or repository to organize and identify sites. Moreover, sites are unreliable for longevity and consistency. They appear, disappear, or are purchased by another site and may change their URL address.

The competency of moderators varies as well. The experience and professional qualifications (or the lack of) for moderators vary among web sites, portals, and ISPs. A new participant might assume incorrectly that hosts are trained in a mental health or helping discipline. Therefore, it is incumbent upon each new participant to evaluate the appropriateness of a specific online support group by inquiring about the professionalism and training of a host, among other criteria. Moderators should state their professional qualifications (or indicate none) and address their cultural competency at the beginning of each session, or during orientation, while not divulging their true identity. Information about the moderator's training and education may help the participant to gain insight about the moderator's competence, value system, cultural competence, and worldview. For example, a moderator who is raised and educated in Australia will most likely have a worldview different from a host raised and educated in Costa Rica. Therefore, the new participant is advised to try several online support groups in search of the best fit.

Members with Limited English Language Skills

Since English is the most common language used in online support groups, the participant should be fluent in expressive and receptive written English. The rapid pace, text-based communication, and simultaneous dialogues may frustrate participants or moderators with language limitations (such as English as a second language or a learning disability). The participant with limited English may be challenged in communicating feelings and thoughts verbally to others without relying on body language and other non-verbal communication to compensate for any verbal deficits (Day & Schneider, 2000). Conversely, others may be challenged to respond in a supportive and helpful manner if they are unable to comprehend the participant's needs. In a text-only format with limited interpersonal feedback, communicative misunderstandings are common for all participants and could be exacerbated for the participant or host with limited English. If the moderator suspects a participant is struggling with English language limitations, the moderator should role model a different level of vocabulary and check with participants periodically to ensure comprehension and accurate expression.

Participants with learning disabilities or physical disabilities that limit dexterity such as cerebral palsy may benefit from software programs that convert spoken word to text and vice versa. Continuous speech programs

enable participation by the dictation of responses and speech synthesis programs translate written text from the computer into speech (Sachs, 2001).

Differing Stages of Group Development

Meier (1997) evaluated one online, stress management, asynchronous support group for social workers. She observed that participants experienced group cohesion and functioned in the working or action stage of group development (Corey & Corey, 1997; Yalom, 1995). Specifically, in the study, the structural complexity of messages increased over time, tended to be longer, and addressed many issues. Unfortunately, research designs do not mimic real world conditions and researchers have no control over the number and type of subjects and topics as well as subjects' occupations and ages, among other variables.

Real world online support groups are unable to maintain the working stage of group development for extended periods (Corey & Corey, 1997). Most are open continuously to new membership. In addition to new participants joining an established group, other online participants may log on or log off at any time during a session. Such fluctuations in membership make it difficult for online support group participants to engage in the typical group phases of warm-up, action, and closure (Hulse-Killacky, Kraus, & Schumacher, 1999; Corey & Corey, 1997). This limitation reduces the efficacy of online support groups as a sole support source for some participants and warrants online support groups as being one component of a larger culturally relevant support system.

Crisis Management

The successful resolution of an emotional crisis in cyber space can be a challenge. Limited feedback and lack of sufficient information make an immediate crisis referral difficult, especially when the host may be unaware of participants' geographic locations around the world, their specific needs, or local resources.

Hoax Perpetuation

People with unscrupulous motives can deceive an online support group about the extent and/or severity of their experiences and emotional distress. Hoaxes are most commonly perpetrated by new, anonymous participants who lack an emotional commitment to other participants in the online support group. Deceptions occur when the perpetrator purposefully communicates distorted or inaccurate information or purposefully withholds relevant information such as not disclosing a history of pedophilia or other sexual misconduct to a teen support group, for instance. Deceptions are

most obvious when details are scarce, when inconsistencies emerge, and when a participant expresses unbelievable experiences or multiple or horrific experiences (however, on occasion, such occurrences are truthful). Participants from cultural backgrounds that respect the opinions of others or do not confront others, especially strangers, may be vulnerable to purposeful deceptions.

Omissions or scarce details may not always represent a purposeful hoax. Instead, vague statements or omissions may result from socio-political barriers (e.g., fear of governmental monitoring and subsequent identification and/or arrest), cultural assumptions or mores (e.g., discretion about private or family affairs), learning disabilities, or limited English skills.

An experienced moderator may suspect a ruse but be unable to decipher the truth immediately. Hosts must demonstrate cultural sensitivity to evaluate if the suspected ruse stems from cultural differences or linguistic limitations, or if the suspected hoax is authentic. If the host suspects cultural or socio-political differences, consider terminating the exchange and focus on another issue if the participant might be in danger of family or governmental reprisal. If the host suspects linguistic limitations, consider clarifying the participant's concerns. Finally, if the host suspects an authentic hoax, continue to support the suspected violator by listening for inconsistencies before confronting and referring to the "Terms of Service" agreement. ISPs, portals, and web sites typically lack strong consequences to punish the violator, except to limit access to online services.

Conclusion

Culturally diverse online support groups pose opportunities and new challenges, especially for those interested in multicultural and international mental health issues. Online support groups have the potential to improve the access and delivery of services to a wide range of people who reside worldwide, including some who would not seek support at all for cultural reasons. They provide an alternative vehicle of support for people in distress by linking people with similar issues, reducing the sense of isolation, and increasing feelings of validation when it may be culturally stigmatizing to seek face-to-face support. However, online support groups are not appropriate for everyone nor can everyone worldwide access online support groups.

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